



## United Way of Pennsylvania

Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary  
Office of the Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Re: WC Docket No. 18-336 and CC Docket No. 92-105 regarding the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018.

Dear Madam,

United Way of Pennsylvania appreciates the opportunity to comment on the current effort undertaken by the Federal Communications Commission to study the feasibility of designating a three-digit number to the National Suicide Hotline and to assess the effectiveness of the current National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. In Pennsylvania, our United Way is fighting for the health, education and financial stability by investing in 211, early childhood education and income stability and family self-sufficiency. We acknowledge increased efforts are needed to create a safe place for all people to call – especially underserved or marginalized populations such as seniors, people with physical or intellectual disabilities, people that identify as LGBTQ+, Veterans, American Natives, non-English speakers, and individuals facing complex problems such as substance/opioid use, human trafficking, and domestic violence. Our organization has a long history of reaching out to the underserved and today we partner with businesses, nonprofit agencies, and government stakeholders to drive systemic changes to solve our community's toughest problems like mental health and crisis.

We encourage the FCC to consider our long-standing and effective 211 work here in Pennsylvania as a vital partner in increasing access to suicide prevention and intervention services. Since the FCC designation of 211 in 2000, we have invested in the launch and infrastructure of 211 and answer over 190,000 requests for help each year. Moreover, each year our United Way invests in mental health, substance use, health, education, and other financial stability services. These critical investments position us to be key partners in the success of an improved mental health and crisis response system.

Another three-digit code will erode the simplicity of a single point of access for community help. As you know, a person in crisis will reach out to the number they are most familiar with. Promoting one number for help with health and human services as well as suicide and crisis services makes sense and will be vastly less confusing for the public. People still call 911 for

inappropriate services because they are familiar with that number. We recommend that resources should be invested to improve a unified single point of access with a blended partnership of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and United Way's 211 services. We believe in the power of partnership to address gaps, not duplicate services, and will be a valuable partner in the fight against suicide. Our 211 staff currently receives calls from people who are experiencing thoughts of suicide and are able to handle these calls. One of the 211 centers has staff cross-trained to handle crisis calls and 211 calls.

We respectfully note that our 211 staff work with vulnerable and homeless veterans on a daily basis to ensure that they are housed in an expedient manner and to make sure they are connected to services that can help them overcome whatever challenges they are facing. 211 ensures that these callers are connected to one or more of the crisis services serving veterans and will do this via warm transfer if the caller is willing for that to happen.

To give you an example of the work that 211 currently does in the field of crisis intervention and suicide, I offer two examples.

First, a veteran called 211 because he was feeling that no one cared about him. He spoke of the loss of friends and other life issues that were challenging to him. Trying to build rapport with the caller, the 211 staffer began to talk with the caller about his children and listened to the caller as he explained the many difficulties he had faced. After a long time (we will talk as long as it takes), the caller agreed to not harm himself and to be available for a call from 211 the next day. When that call took place, there was another long conversation and trust building. On day three, the caller was open to being connected to another agency for additional help and that connection was made.

Second, a teen texted from her high school classroom to seek help for her friend. She had promised her friend that she would not call 911 but she knew she needed to find another way to get help for her friend. Through working with 911 and the school, 211 was able to get the student connected to help.

You can learn more about our work at [uwp.org](http://uwp.org) and can reach my office for additional questions or discussion at 717-238-7365. Thank you for your time in addressing this important issue and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

*Anne Walsh Fogoros*

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United Way of PA